DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 126 406 CG 010 695

AUTHOR Margolis, Gary F.
TITLE Pushing the Freshman First Semester Panic Button: Some Perspectives on Counseling Anxious Freshmen the First Weeks of School.
NOTE 10p.; Not available in hard copy due to marginal legibility of orignial document.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment Problems; *Anxiety; *College Freshmen; *Counseling Centers; *Counseling Services; Emotional Adjustment; Higher Education; Intervention; *Student Personnel Services

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the college freshman, his anxieties in the first few weeks of school, and the ways in which the college counselor can help. The anxious freshman is seen as expressing his panic and confusion by noting the differences between himself and his peers, and by questioning the correctness of his college related decisions. His anxieties are aggravated by homesickness and the fact that he is at this stage both adolescent and adult in terms of feelings, expectations and demands. In those first few weeks the freshman needs immediate feedback or response, and that is not always possible. Intervention by the Counseling Center should be provided by counselor availability, provision of advisory services, outreach to the new students, anticipation and preparation, and helping the student express as many of his feelings and concerns as possible. (NG)

PUSHING THE FRESHMAN FIRST SEMESTER PANIC BUTTON

Some Perspectives on Counseling Anxious Freshmen the First Weeks of School

Gary F. Margolis, Ph.D.
Director of Counseling Services
Middlebury College

During the first weeks of school every college counselor can expect to meet some first year students showing different types of anxiety and upset. This anxiety has been traditionally called "the freshman syndrome", homesickness", "college culture shock", or "early adjustment problem", each phrase more ambiguous for a problem that is specific and complex. How do these freshmen look and sound? They may both show and tell us about their feelings, by crying, by not being able to catch their breath and by being very uncomfortable in their chair, or just the opposite, by sitting back, looking down or out the window, and waiting for us to ask the first question as to how they're feeling. Whether they show us actively or passively, they have come to us because they are feeling both specific and ambivalent pain, multiple in nature, and have no means for naming it, sorting out what they are feeling, or developing ways of achieving (coping) some new feeling or behavior.

The student can say a number of different things to share this panic and confusion with the counselor. He may say that he feels very different from all of the students around him, different financially, religiously and racially, each difference then experienced as an interpersonal difference which tends to further isolate the student. These physical and more tangible differences cannot be quickly accounted for or played down, because in conjunction with the more dynamic interpersonal differences, they tend to reinforce one another in making the student feel anxious with no means by which to reduce that anxiety;

the experiencing of differences tends to immobilize both old and potentially new coping mechanisms. The student cannot change physical realities and may then feel he cannot influence relationships.

Along with feeling and stating these tangible differences between himself and his peers, the anxious freshman also senses a great number of other differences that we can talk about as competencies and intuitions. The first year student comes to college with certain proven competencies in academic, athletic and social spheres. What college asks a student to do is to renegotiate these old competencies into new ones. Sometimes recognizing that this is a demand and knowing that he will behaviorally have to meet that demand can be overwhelming. So the statements we hear underneath "I feel tense or anxious because I'm different" is doubled by the student feeling "I am different but I am also not as competent (and therefore not as good) as the other students. I can't trust my intuitions about myself or my old experiences." This feeling can be intensified because some other entering students are very good at masking their fears. A student who is feeling different and inadequate has the additional problem of feeling isolated because his peers do not share and show some of the same feelings. Roommates and dorm cliques can quickly falsify their own level of security and competency. The anxious freshman usually then begins to question both his decision to attend this particular college or to go to college at all; specific problems in courses, relationships, and new environment become enlarged when the student questions his ability to make a good decision. This new fear can include doubts about the advice given by parents and high school teachers.

At the same time our client is experiencing fear and panic he also can be in touch with the opposite desire which is "I don't want to be different",

"I want to feel adequate", or, "I want to feel good about my decision to come here." The more the freshman experiences the negative feelings, feelings which can show themselves in depression, anxiety, lack of sleep, or psychosomatic symptoms, the more they are accentuated by the simultaneous experience of the desire not to feel those things. As if this were not complicated enough, some of the usual feelings freshmen experience, homesickness and ambivalence occur, too. The freshman is truly an adolescent; he has the tools for being a child but the demands of an adult, college demands that say be responsible, meet deadlines, and perform.

Some other components of freshman anxiety, but not unimportant, include the fact that the freshman is probably experiencing his first extended period away from home. In most colleges and universities this now means not only being away from home, but being in a new environment in which the college does not pretend that it is the home anymore. Many colleges are not acting in loco parentis. Indeed, many homes try for better or worse to be in loco collegium, to mimic the more open college. Freshmen also find themselves confronted with having to organize every aspect of their life - what courses to take, when to eat, what to wear, what hours to keep, how to get together with members of the opposite sex, - how to make decisions compatible with individual needs and life style. What makes this difficult is that the freshman's life style is also in a state of experiment and development overridden by the expectation of some parents, administrators and faculty, that because the student has shown academic and extra-curricular competence previous to matriculation, these skills should be negotiated into immediate, adult competencies. The student experiences these real questions and the expectation that he should be doing well. And what goes along with every expectation is some implied threat, threat that failure to do

well will result in recrimination or rejection in some form or another.

What many freshmen don't get during the first few weeks of college is exactly what they need. What they want is immediate response or feedback to the questions of how different are they from their peers and how are they doing with their behaviors and feelings; they need feedback so that they know as early as possible where they stand. Some expectations on both sides are unrealistic, and what ultimately happens during the development of the interpersonal and academic year is that the student learns to wait and the institution learns to feedback.

What then are some of our counseling options with a student who is experiencing these kinds of first semester anxieties? First, we as counselors and student personnel workers have to be actively available. Our schedules must be kept fairly open at the beginning of the year; in most cases they are because heavy case loads haven't yet built up. There has to be some office, whether it be the counselor's office, the Dean's office or the physician's office which can be responsive to this type of walk-in problem. Complementing these institutional sources of help, it is also useful to have a well developed dormitory advising system which includes peer counselors living on the floor with freshmen and house directors supporting the peer counselors. What we then have is a crisis intervention that reaches out and reaches in, - active availability. Often a freshman experiencing this kind of anxiety will not come to talk to any of the people mentioned above for the same reasons that create the bind that he or she finds himself in; they feel awful on the one hand but have to act as if they don't on the other. What usually gets caught in between is the fact that many of their feelings can't be masked. We can see how they are feeling simply by looking at them. When we can read these non-verbal signs of distress, the

professional or peer counselor may take the opportunity to ask that student, how are you feeling, is there anything that I may be able to help you with. Some would agree that this is not crisis intervention but rather imposition and over-protection. Hopefully the care with which that question is asked, the option it allows, can determine the amount of freedom the freshman has in choosing to respond to that question.

Second, counselors can prepare for this particular kind of problem early in the school year, simply by anticipating it. Knowing this student may come to the counselor can help him in mobilizing as many support resources as possible. Obviously the danger in preparing or anticipating any kind of problem is that the counselor may tend to generalize or stereotype the problem. Hopefully this anticipation will in fact free the counselor to both listen more closely and to offer emotional and practical support.

Third, in the actual counseling session (except in the case of the student whose psychological boundaries are quite shaky and who needs affirmation and solidification), it is important for the counselor to help the freshman get as many feelings out as possible; this is not going to be easy. First, as usual, these feelings are multiple and complex. Second, the student may be feeling ambivalence about how weak or non-successful he wants to appear. And third, the counselor's role vis-a-vis faculty and administration may not be clearly evident to the new student. The counselor may wish to tell the freshman what his job is and what confidentiality entails. Feelings that are expressed may include feelings of fear, frustration, anger, self-doubt, loneliness, self-consciousness, and occasionally disintegration. In this kind of crisis intervention situation I do not think it is the counselor's job to get at the dynamic

roots of the feelings. Rather the initial emphasis should be on first, helping the freshman express feelings and second, helping the student know that he is not alone with his feelings, and third, if possible, exploring alternatives to his existing situation. The counselor should make sure the client knows that he or she has taken in what the freshman has said and that the freshman is not alone in experiencing these kinds of feelings relative to the rest of his peers. The counselor may tell the freshman that he's been seeing a number of students who express this kind of problem, that he is doing so presently or has done so in the past, and, if it is true, that the counselor himself, as a freshman in college or at some other point, may have experienced some of these kinds of feelings. Initially getting the feelings out and helping the student feel that he is not alone with this problem can be very helpful. This will usually result in some spontaneous relief, but the counselor can usually expect that the freshman experiencing this kind of panic will be back. The counselor should not only expect they will be back but should plan to follow up this initial session with other sessions closely scheduled to the first one.

During the second and third visits the counselor can again demonstrate his willingness to support and include the freshman by helping the freshman not feel isolated, and also begin to explore with the student the whole area of coping mechanisms, what behaviors the freshman showed prior to college which were successful in helping the student feel good about him or herself, what kinds of behaviors resulted in success and affection and which of those coping and achieving mechanisms could be useful in getting the same kinds of support at college. Part of freshman anxiety revolves around the fact that old coping mechanisms or achieving mechanisms either aren't working or are seemingly distant from what the student feels is <u>possibly</u> workable. Inherent in many of the questions and feelings the student

may be expressing is the question "Will it be okay for me to experiment and perhaps fail?" Previous success may act negatively in the new college environment. It may act as an expectation which paralyzes. What the counselor may have to suggest and support is that these old behaviors helped the student achieve and cope, some of them will be useful at college, and new behaviors may have to be learned, and in fact part of college is the achievement of that process. This is a fairly intellectual thing to say yet often in conjunction with exploring feelings, it can be meaningful.

The counselor may also be able to give the freshman other kinds of feedback. If what the freshman needs is some support in the area of knowing where he stands, there may be ways the counselor can both give and gather this kind of information early in the school year. He can make contact with an instructor, suggest places to eat, supply a tutor, or simply directly respond to questions that the student asks.

These are some of the areas that can be dealt with in individual counseling. Another way of responding to freshmen anxiety is by establishing groups, in which students know if they are feeling lonely or upset, they can come to these groups and expect to find other students who are feeling somewhat the way they do. As you might expect this is more ideal than actual. Occasionally these groups come together, click and become supportive. Many times students will be fearful of coming to groups like these simply because they don't want to be identified with the particular problem they are having. Having such groups available offers an alternative to individual counseling, another option the student may choose to use. These groups should not be encounter sessions or of the T-group variety. They must be sensitively led as an effective discussion in which the emphasis is on support and clarification. Counselors may develop and

select students for these groups based on their initial interviews.

Occasionally freshman anxiety either is or turns into something extended and more serious. What the counselor sees can be not merely an expression stimulated by all the conditions discussed above but indeed represents something more pervasive and developmental in nature, requiring different and perhaps long term counseling. At its outer limit ten days to two weeks should be the longest period of time this kind of anxiety should be handled as a crisis intervention problem. When the counselor says to the student let's see how you feel in three days or a week, he may hear, "I'm living with this problem hour to hour and I can't even think ahead three or four days." And the pain they feel really is continuous. If there isn't some relief within two weeks, one or two things may be going on. The problem may be deeper and require intensive counseling attention, or the student may be in the process of trying to make a decision as to whether or not he or she should leave college. If the student hasn't raised the issue himself, it is helpful in the crisis intervention phase of freshman anxiety for the counselor to bring up the question of whether or not the student is thinking about leaving the school and, if this is the case, the counselor and student can then establish a date by which to make the decision. Often setting an arbitrary date at which the decision will be discussed can be very helpful in helping the student know that it is okay to talk about leaving and put some time limit to this particular anxiety. Some students spend the better part of their first semester not acutely anxious but still unsettled and ambivalent about whether or not they should remain in school. This decision should be focused as early as possible so that they can <u>actively</u> begin to work on that decision, rather than keeping it in the anxious and somewhat passive state although it is very common for students to continually question their

decision to stay in college, indeed college itself stimulates this question, during the semester. A student who maintains these feelings over a long period of time may be giving us an additional message. Showing this problem and sharing it with a large number of people on campus, deans, counselors, doctors, and peer counselors is one way of mobilizing lots of attention and support. Keeping the decision ambivalent, being uncommitted, also puts pressure on the student's parents by keeping them off balance. Keeping anyone off balance can be a way of showing angry feelings toward oneself or toward others or maintaining a necessary advantage. I am not suggesting further interpretations be explored in the initial phases of crisis intervention; they may be dynamics the counselor could be aware of in continued therapy and keep in the back of his mind as these questions and feelings are expressed and sorted out.

Freshman who do go through this early anxiety and make it through, often turn out to be some of the most active and personally achieving students at college. The act of making it through early anxiety helps a student feel good about him or herself and also puts the student in contact at an earlier date with more people on the campus than most other freshmen. Their crisis makes them more a part of the community simply by the fact that they've been supported by it and now know more people. Their crisis does for them what they need to get done.